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Arming Managua

Even though the House has grown a little warmer toward giving President Reagan $100 million for anticommunist guerrillas, more and more Soviet arms are pouring into Nicaragua in an effort to beggar U.S. aid to the contras as too little, too late.

White House officials are preparing to deliver that message in confidential briefings this week for Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill and lesser Democratic leaders. Nobody is hoping to convert the speaker's deep and emotional opposition to the contras. The president's men just want to ease the intensity that for weeks has kept the issue from a House vote.

To do that, Reagan and his aides pray O'Neill will consider the implications of the Soviet buildup in Sandinista armed power. He will be advised that more Soviet arms have reached Nicaragua this year than in all of 1985 and that Soviet pilots are actually "test-flying" just-delivered helicopters.

If help for the anticommunist resistance is further delayed, the Soviet buildup could make the Sandinista forces so strong that the military balance in Nicaragua would be frozen. The contras then never could be transformed from a ragtag band to a serious operational force with a chance of changing the regime in Managua.

Such warnings have not previously been received with respect in the Democratic hideaways of Capitol Hill. Aided by a handful of Republican defectors, an overwhelming majority of House Democrats has voted to block contra aid. But small, scattered signs of change give the president new hope.

Rep. Olympia Snowe, a liberal Republican from Maine, has told head counters she probably will switch and vote yes when the contra aid bill comes up (even though, a colleague told us, "she will be handwringing all the way"). Also included in a group of fence-sitting House members that recently visited Central America was Rep. Richard Ray, a moderate Democrat from Georgia. He also leans toward a switch.

White House insiders believe they have acquired allies among House Democrats who could help the president mitigate O'Neill's wrath over the contras as killers of babies and nuns. These congressmen heard sharp attacks on the Sandinistas in private talks with Central America's four democratically elected presidents, from Costa Rica, Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador—much sharper than is heard in public.

That may reflect Reagan's efforts to pump up support for the contra plans by talking on the telephone to his Central American counterparts. One president received the impression that while Reagan does not want to send any U.S. troops to Nicaragua, he will if he has to.

But the rapid Sandinista military buildup also explains the trend of the fence-sitters to Reagan. Until now, no Soviet pilot has ever been known to fly a combat aircraft for or in a country hostile to the United States on the American mainland. According to White House sources, Soviet "technical assembly personnel" and test pilots are handling the new batch of MI-8 helicopters that arrived at Corinto last month.

The MI-8 is a top-of-the-line Soviet counterinsurgency weapon, designed for quick movement of troops, short-range reconnaissance and rapid supply for combat units.

Since speed in the Nicaraguan buildup is seen by Moscow as imperative in the interest of beating resumed U.S. aid to the contras, there was no time to train local pilots before the helicopters arrived. Instead, the Kremlin risked a negative response in Congress and a Reagan administration reaction by sending Soviet pilots. They are flight-testing and training, but not flying combat missions as of now.

Another development that will be carefully analyzed for the speaker is completion of the new Sandinista military port of El Bluff on the Caribbean, the first major harbor on the Atlantic side of the isthmus. The new military harbor transforms the supply-line problem, cutting weeks from future arms deliveries from the Soviet Union and Cuba. Until now, Soviet supply ships have had to circumnavigate South America and unload at Corinto on the Pacific side, the only harbor in Nicaragua safe for large ships.

Tip O'Neill over the years has paid more attention to stories of atrocities than the Soviet military and even strategic threat on the American mainland. Now he is being asked to look at hard intelligence in hopes that he will hasten congressional action before it becomes too late to matter.

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